42™ Rules for Successful Collaboration

2ND EDITION

A Practical Approach to Working with People, Processes, and Technology

DAVID COLEMAN

SECOND EDITION

"42 Rules for Successful Collaboration (2nd Edition)" Book Excerpt

A Practical Approach to Working with People, Processes, and Technology

By David Coleman

May all your future collaborations be successful!
David

E-mail: info@superstarpress.com
20660 Stevens Creek Blvd., Suite 210
Cupertino, CA 95014

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Intro

Why would I write another book on collaboration when I just released one last year (Collaboration 2.0 with co-author Stewart Levine)? Anything to do with Web 2.0 and Social Networks is hot right now. I want to be clear—collaboration is a human behavior, not a technology or a process but an act or series of acts that you choose to perform with one or more people (through the computer) to accomplish a specific purpose or goal. This is my fourth book on collaboration, and I believe the most easy to read.

I have often talked about the "Mom Test" in my writing; what I mean by this is if a collaborative application is easy enough for my Mom to use (she is smart and well educated but did not grow up with computers) then it passes the "Mom Test." Glance,[1] a screen sharing collaboration tool passed the Mom Test, whereas WebEx (now Cisco) did not. My goal is to have this book be an easy enough to read to pass the "Mom Test."

My first two books (published by Prentice Hall) were also contributed volumes, but they were much more academic (I think all Prentice Hall books end up looking like text books!) and much longer (600–700 pages). My mom took one quick look through them and asked, "Do I have to read this?" At that point I knew these books had not passed the "Mom Test." Although they were popular in undergraduate and graduate-level classes on collaboration, they were not easily read by the uninitiated.

Collaboration 2.0, which was itself a collaborative effort (between Stewart Levine and myself) and used a variety of collaboration tools to help with the writing and publication of the book. Collaboration 2.0 was meant to be a more

1. http://www.glance.net

approachable book (and only 300 pages) as well as a more balanced one. I asked Stewart, who has more expertise in interpersonal communications and interactions, to write part of the book and bring more "people" into a book mostly about "process" and "technology."

We use the same holistic model (People, Process and Technology) in this book, but the format is designed for a different audience. The 42 Rules format helps break up this collective wisdom into bite sized and easily digestible chunks. So you could read only one rule (written in plain English) and still take something of value from the book, without reading anything else. Of course I encourage you to read all 42 rules, but it is my hope that this book will now pass the "Mom Test." After all, it is best to lead by example, and since I advise a lot of collaboration tool vendors and start-ups, and am always on them about making their software more approachable and easy, I thought my book should follow those principles also.

This book is not only different in format, but is unique in the way it was written. I decided to "walk my talk," and ask for input from the many groups, communities and social networks I am in, and make this a collaborative effort. Not that my three earlier books were not also a collaborative effort, but I never used a social network to help write them. To start this effort, I posted a question on LinkedIn asking, "What is your best advice around Collaboration?" I got many replies, and some of them were so good that I included them in this book. So it really has been a collaborative effort.

I also have a good relationship with Mitchell Levy, publisher of HappyAbout titles and co-publisher, with Laura Lowell, of the 42 Rules book series through Super Star Press. Both these relationships have been collaborative and have both added to this book and to my life.

Rule

2 Know Why You Are Collaborating

Another way of looking at this question is to ask yourself, *"What are the business behaviors my organization needs to have in order to achieve the results I am looking for?"*

Jeff Young is a collaborative learning facilitator and coach. Jeff wrote this rule because most potential clients he talks with are interested in collaboration but have trouble articulating, to peers or to management, what they want to improve through collaboration. This lack of clarity results in a much lower success rate in initially funding the collaborative effort and in keeping it adequately funded over time.

This may seem like a very obvious and perhaps even silly rule. Yet I find that most people and most organizations I have met with have very different ideas about the meaning of collaboration. Many think that collaboration is a touchy-feely and weak approach while others think it is just about offering technology to aid communication—like a fancy telephone. While the meaning of collaboration is fuzzy, what seems to be even fuzzier is why they want to collaborate in the first place.

When I have asked clients why they are collaborating, most of the responses I received were similar to the following:

- **To reduce costs:** My training budget was slashed and I have to find a way of bringing a dispersed workforce together to get vital training on much less money, so I invested in collaboration technology.

- **To reduce travel and time away from work:** We hold weekly sales meetings that are critical to the success of our business and we have grown to a point where it is taking them too long away from critical clients for everyone to come by every week to get the latest strategy or share ideas.
- **We can't get everyone into the same room at the same time:** Everyone's calendar is so jammed that it has become impossible to get everyone together at the same time.
- **Because we want to involve everyone in the company:** It is a personal value of mine to include everyone in the important decision-making of the company. It makes everyone feel good about working for this company.

While these responses seem to be answering my question in a very direct and reasonable way, I have noticed something importantly similar about them. The reasons all seem to be formed from a similar mindset described by this generic statement: *"We are used to doing _____ in our business, and things have changed to a point where we need to find a way to support our interactions so we can keep doing it in spite of the changes."* The responses tend to be ones that are desires to keep doing the same actions we are used to, not really getting at the business reasons for ***why*** we want to collaborate.

Another way of looking at this question is to ask yourself, *"What are the business behaviors my organization needs to have in order to achieve the results I am looking for?"* When I know what specific business results I am looking for and that collaboration is a critical behavior I can tie directly to achieving my results, ***then*** I know why I want to collaborate.

It is rare that I run into a client who responds to my "why" question with a response like, *"Because we need to increase our revenue by $4 million next year and I want to come together with my customers and suppliers to figure out together how we can increase our value to the marketplace to earn that increase in revenue."* When I get a response like that, it is very clear to me why they want to collaborate and whether the investment in collaboration is worth the time, effort, and money to make it happen.

Rule

3

Trust Is Not Enough!

What I came to realize is that, for collaboration to be successful, trust does help, but understanding the "local context" of your team members was even more critical.

Other contributors with rules in this book will tell you that trust is the cornerstone of collaboration. However, in my 20 years of working with teams I have seen some teams where the members don't trust each other, yet they do collaborate if they have a common goal. So what is really required for successful collaboration?

For many years I thought trust was critical for collaboration or for distributed teams to be effective, but after attending the NewWOW (New ways of working: http://www.newwow.net) symposium in the Summer of 2008 which looked at the effects of culture, I began to understand that trust was just not enough. Also, I can easily think of situations where people on a team or committee did not trust each other yet worked together for a common goal. Just look at any standards committee for a good example of this.

From Wikipedia: Trust is *a relationship of reliance*.

> *It does not need to involve belief in the good character, vices, or morals of the other party. And it does not need to include an action that you and the other party are mutually engaged in. In fact, trust is a* ***prediction*** *of reliance on an action, based on what a party knows about the other party.*
> http://tinyurl.com/6xa2w3 [2]

2. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trust_(social_sciences)

What I came to realize is that for collaboration to be successful, trust does help, but understanding the "local context" of your team members was even more critical. What I mean by "local context" is knowing about the other team members, the organizations they are in, the country culture and their individual characteristics. Without an understanding of this local context, poor communication and missed meanings run rampant on distributed teams; especially teams with members from "high context" cultures (like Japan) when they are intermixed with team members from "low context" cultures (like the U.S.).

A good example of this occurred when I conducted some classes on collaboration in Japan a few years ago. The classes went well and when I got back to the U.S., I emailed my main contact in Japan to discuss some unresolved issues from the training. I also wanted to introduce them to others in the U.S. who I thought could benefit their business. I made an online (email) introduction and assumed everything was proceeding.

But that was not the case. My contact in Japan was not even replying to my emails. Finally in frustration I called my contact in Japan and asked what was going on. Now, I come from NY and have been told I can be rather straightforward, part of being from a low context culture. However, my contact in Japan was from a high context culture, one that also avoids conflict. He had enough trust in me to tell me that the introduction was being ignored because it had gone to the wrong people, and they lost "face" by it. Once I sent the email to my contact's boss, and asked permission for the introduction, things went a lot better. The boss "saved face," my contact was allowed to email me again, and the introduction was made.

How many times has something like this tripped you up when working on a geographically distributed and cross cultural team? I almost always recommend to my clients that the first team or project meeting should be in person (then it is much easier to do the electronic collaboration that follows) because it helps all the team members understand the local context for each other. This in-person visit, although expensive, should have some social experiences thrown in, as they help to speed up understanding (and possibly trust) of the other team members.

I found that taking the time in the beginning to learn about and know each of the other team members paid off in spades later on. Also the agreement on clear team processes and interactions at the beginning of a project also really paid off. Yes, both of these help to develop trust, but more than that, they give you an understanding of those you are working with, which is even more critical when you work at a distance.

Rule

6 Being a Conscious Communicator Supports Successful Collaboration

For successful collaboration, get clear on the meaning of words.[3]

Stewart Levine has a 20-year practice in helping people to communicate with each other better. He is a great practitioner of communication to support successful collaborations.

Although it has some caveats, a 1967 study by Albert Mehrabian and Susan Ferris published in The Journal of Consulting Psychology revealed that about 90 percent of the message we get in a face-to-face (F2F) interaction is through tone of voices, and visual cues. Only about 10 percent of the information we get from other people is based on the content of what they say.

Today globalization of business, the movement towards geographically distributed and cross cultural teams, and the increasing number of people working from home is a fact of life. The way people interact, produce and collaborate has changed dramatically. The frequency and availability of F2F communication has been dramatically curtailed either by the rising cost of fuel or by travel bans in a variety of multinational organizations. What this means is the 10 percent that was information about content, is now 100 percent of the information a team member may get through interacting with you virtually. With

3. Let's Get Real or Let's Not Play: The Demise of Dysfunctional Selling and the Advent of Helping Clients Succeed/Mahan Khalsa, 1999, Franklin Covey Co. Printed by White Water Press

this situation in mind you need to be very conscious about what you say, when you say it and how you say it to your team members.

Below are three best practices (with examples) of conscious communication and how they can best be applied to distributed teams or distance collaboration:

1. **Build an Environment of Trust:** Although David says, "Trust is not enough" in Rule 3, I believe that trust is one of the most critical elements of effective distance communications. To create an environment of trust often requires the team leader to set an example for this behavior. This may be from offering open and transparent communication with other team members, or just a communication style that supports the free sharing of information between team members. One of the ways to do this and compensate for the lower bandwidth of communication is to increase the bandwidth of what you say. Don't assume everyone understands exactly what you say. Try to embellish on what you are saying and often see each communication as a way to tell a story.
2. **Set Expectations:** One of the key ways to do this is by making sure clear expectations are set at the beginning of every project. The best way I know how to do this is to post a set of "rules of engagement" for the team that clearly states the proper ways to interact, as well as what is expected from each team member. Some examples of these rules can include:
   - Each team member is expected to participate in any online discussions about tasks that they are involved in.
   - Each team member is expected to respond to direct communications From other team members within 24 hours.
   - Each team member is expected to complete the tasks they have agreed to or let other team members know about the changed situation.
3. **Doable Tasks:** Nothing can kill a team's morale quicker than burying them with a plethora of impossible tasks. Not everyone on a team is a Hercules (cleaning out the Aegean stables). It is best to begin with small tasks that provide the empowering experience of accomplishment for team members. It is important to acknowledge those triumphs. As noted in Rule 21, it is important to celebrate success to have continued collaboration.

Clear communication is critical to successful collaboration. In Rule 7 Stewart gives some more examples of how your behavior can overcome some of the challenges with virtual teams.

About the Author

David Coleman, Founder and Managing Director of Collaborative Strategies (CS), http://www.collaborate.com, has been involved with groupware, collaborative technologies, knowledge management (KM), online communities, and social networks since 1989. He is a thought leader, frequent public speaker, industry analyst, and author of books and magazine articles on these topics. His comments and analyses are most frequently found in the "Collaboration Blog." http://www.collaborate.com. He has worked with a wide range of collaboration vendors including IBM/Lotus, Microsoft, Macromedia, Adobe, Intuit, EMC, and Oracle, and helped them with strategy, positioning, or demand generation projects. He also works with end-user organizations to help them select collaboration technologies, and most recently has been working with them on "collaborative consolidation" within the enterprise, building online communities and creating a variety of social networks. David also works with distributed

teams (across organizational boundaries) to transform them into high-performance teams. He can be reached at:
davidc@collaborate.com or at (650) 342-9197.

Other Books by David Coleman:

Groupware Technology and Applications, Prentice Hall, 1995

Groupware: Collaborative Strategies for Corporate LANs and Intranets, Prentice Hall, 1997

Collaboration 2.0 (with Stewart Levine), Happy About Press, February 2008

In "42 Rules for Successful Collaboration" David Coleman wrote Rules:

1, 3, 23, 25, 27, 28, 30, 3, 39, and 42.

Getting “42 Rules for Successful Collaboration (2nd Edition)” (http://happyabout.com/42rules/successful-collaboration.php)

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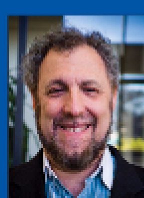
It doesn't matter whether you are a 5-person team or a 50,000 person enterprise. When it comes to collaboration, the same rules apply: the more you share the more your knowledge is worth; understanding your team member's "local context" is critical; and technology wrongly gets most of the attention. Mr. Coleman's 20 years of research and experience allows him to take a holistic approach to collaboration, looking at people, process and technology, which are the way the book is organized. This book was written with other experts in David's social networks which contributed a treasure trove of insight, expertise and experience.

"David…came up with a great book about collaboration."
Guy Kawasaki, Technology Evangelist, Blogger, and Entrepreneur

"This book, *42 Rules for Successful Collaboration*, and the others to follow, will help us all forge a means to optimize technology within our work environments with less pain, thanks to David's efforts."
Catherine Upton, Publisher, E-Learning! Magazine



DAVID COLEMAN
is the author of 3 other books about collaboration, including "Collaboration 2.0" (Happy About, 2008). He is a blogger, (the Collaboration blog at www.collaborate.com), and the Managing Director of Collaborative Strategies.
He has over 20 years of experience with collaboration technologies, people issues and critical processes.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION : COLLABORATION TECHNOLOGIES : WEB 2.0

$ 19.95 US

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